

Williamson County on radar for 21 companies looking for new homes, Economic Development director says

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Williamson County Economic & Community Development Director Matt Largen and his office are working with 21 "active" companies which could produce 8,242 jobs and produce a \$300 million capital investment if they all chose to locate here.

But Largen told the Brentwood Cool Springs Chamber of Commerce Economic and Community Development Forum Friday morning at Verizon's regional headquarters that the county is running out of Class A office space with enough contiguous room to house the companies.

"Right now the largest contiguous space we have available is 100,000 square feet," Largen said. "Seven (of the 21) are looking for space of greater than 100,000 square feet."

While some space still exists for building new office buildings, Largen said many prospects are on a fast track and want something available immediately or very quickly and that is where the county has a shortfall. While some space might exist in Brentwood's Maryland Farms office park, some of the buildings cannot meet the demands of high-tech companies making the move to the area, Largen said.

Largen gave a timeline of the process for the decision by Jackson National Life to locate in Franklin, saying the process went back possibly as far late 2007 because Jackson National Chief Operating Officer Mike Wells said the company had looked at 44 other cities and Economic Development officials did not have their first meeting with Jackson National until May 6, 2008, when the Nashville area was on the short list.

"You don't even get a chance to make your case until it gets down to two," Largen said of the recruitment process, which included a meeting with Williamson County Mayor Rogers Anderson and Franklin Mayor John Schroer on May 6, 2008.

"They did an amazing job," Largen said of the sales job the mayors did for Jackson National officials. "At this point, we had the space. Nashville is always the hook, but you don't have to look far to see that most of the corporate growth in the last 10 years has been in Williamson County."

After the project went into an indefinite hold in October 2008 due the global financial crisis, area Economic Development officials continued in contact with Jackson National officials, who continued to express a desire to locate what was then an operations center with 500 jobs in the Nashville area. In late 2009 and early 2010, the process resumed and Jackson National revealed the facility would be a regional headquarters with 750 employees, which gave the project a high priority.

While some financial incentives were given by Williamson County officials, Franklin officials only committed to fast tracking Jackson National's permitting process for taking 150,000 square feet in One Greenway Centre off Carothers Parkway, across from Nissan Americas headquarters.

A company which does not market directly to the consumer, Largen said officials had to ask Jackson National to make a splashy entrance into the county.

"They weren't originally planning to do an announcement," Largen said. "They did the announcement as a favor to us and the work we did on the project."

The decision by Jackson National to pick Williamson County and One Greenway Centre further diversifies the county's business environment, Largen said. Other sectors represented include the automotive industry with Nissan, consumer products with Mars Petcare, telecommunications with Verizon, and CHS/Healthways representing the healthcare sector.

"It is dangerous to be too focused on one environment," Largen said of the broad spectrum of headquarters, both international and regional, located in Williamson County. Of the 21 active searches being conducted by companies in which Williamson County is included, 30 percent would be headquarters.

For many agencies, the Tennessee Department of Economic Development or the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce are the first contacts, but working regionally is so important.

"When you talk about economic development, you have to talk regionally," said Largen, who said in some areas of the country, "it is almost like a hostage swap" when prospects are transferred from one county to another.

Largen said when asked by site consultants about incentives available, a colleague recently told him to say, "You don't go into Tiffany's looking for a sale."